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LATIN AND GREEK AS AIDS TO ENGLISH COMPOSITION

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If the value of Latin and Greek were determined by the regard in which the average student claims to hold them, they would have no plea for inclusion in the curriculum of the up-to-date school. For they belong to that definite class of studies considered by the modernist not only useless but to a degree pernicious, in that it delays the pursuit of more important things. Therefore the student, when he sets out for college, leaves them behind him with little regret; and if he thinks of them further it is with that kindly tolerance that one may well feel for useless things that are over and done.

But when he enters college he finds that the gods never extend unmixed blessings to mortals; they have emancipated him from the toil and tedium of ancient languages only to put upon him the yoke of English composition. To this he transfers the air of disdain and tolerance that he has been led to believe is the modern attitude to all that is old. For the Freshman feels that he has no need for composition, being either fortunately proficient or hopelessly incompetent; and in his crafty mind one reason is as good as the other for giving it wide room. But it is a required study, so he must exercise his ingenuity to prevent its interfering with his care-free college course, getting out of it some little and putting into it some less. So on the first day he settles down in his seat, bored but self-complacent, and looks his instructor over with a critical eye, knowing that to the din of education the voice of such a creature has little to add, or he would not be what the Freshman calls a "rhetoric prof."

At this point the instructor should cloud the serene countenance of watchful waiting and strike in the heart of the watchers a note of warning. He should impress upon their minds the immediate

realization that the art and science of rhetoric, old before their language was born, is not, as they and many of their teachers believe, a trivial thing of punctuation and spelling that can be looked after by a stenographer or good clerk; but something to which they might apply as many days and nights as the Psalmist advised for the attainment of wisdom. So instead of making the conventional theme assignment for the morrow, as they expect, he begins an inventory of the linguistic attainments of his class. He distributes cards and instructs the students to make a statement of the amount of work done by each in foreign languages, ancient and modern; thereby converting watchful waiting into perturbed anxiety. For where has the Freshman heard that foreign languages, particularly ancient languages, were of any value to the writer of compositions?

When the instructor collects his cards and looks them over, he discovers that in his group of a hundred or more he has two or three students who have done some Greek, twenty-five or so who have had from two to four years of Latin, while the rest are credited with an equal amount of work in French, German, or Spanish. Reversing the method of Polyphemus, he calls for Ulysses first, and asks what profit he has found in the study of Homer. This question invariably provokes one of those witticisms so loved by Xanthias, so laughed at by the rabble, and so loathed by the true disciples of Dionysus: "It is all Greek to me!" Fortunately the Freshman, not gifted with the loquacity of Xanthias, ends his wit here, and here the instructor is willing to leave it. So he turns to the subject of their Roman impedimenta, only to find that he has given his students a chance to voice their contempt for a thing almost as inconsequential as English composition. Few admit that they ever studied Latin; most of them *took* it, and confess without shame that it has left no scar tissue in their sensitive minds.

Let them talk; even encourage them, cautiously of course, and with gentle innuendo directed at educational tyrants who can so lay on with the letter and yet be so sparing of the spirit. They will soon begin to suspect that you are on their side. Make them sure that you are; for then they may succeed in unburdening their soul—of its spleen at least.

Then turn to the subject in hand, English composition, the structure of the paragraph; and in your exposition of the task for the morrow quote casually a phrase or a line of Latin that has some bearing on the subject. This will sound a second alarm, for the Freshmen will be quick to suspect a desecration of their buried pet aversion. Quote frequently, day after day, anything simple enough to be caught by a good second- or third-year Latin student. For example, while discussing unity you might cite Horace's dictum: *Denique sit quid vis simplex dumtaxat et unum.* Probably no one will know *dumtaxat*, but a number will catch the meaning of the line. In commenting on diction quote Caesar's remark: *Tanquam scopulum fugere inauditum et insolens verbum.* For such clear advice any well-minded Freshman will forgive the terse Roman his frequent excursions into foreign territory, and incidentally he will realize for the first time in his life what "insolent" means. And on the flyleaf of his rhetoric text he may find: *Qui novit, neque id quod sentit exprimit, perinde est ac si nesciret.* Have him memorize the sentence and give him also the saying of Thucydides: *ὅτε γνοὺς καὶ μὴ σαφῶς διδάξας ἐν ἵσω καὶ εἰ μὴ ἐνεθυμήθη.*

Of course the student at first will reveal his knowledge of Latin with a grudging condescension, but this will in time turn to mild interest, which is apt to become astonishment if by any chance you should assign such a theme topic as "Youth and Crabbed Age," and by way of preparatory barrage read to the class from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Book ii, chapters 12-14; or Plutarch, *De virtute morali*, c. xi; or Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 156 ff., citing for supplementary references Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, scene 7, lines 143-76, and Bacon's essay, "Of Youth and Age." Even the modernist recognizes in these passages signs of what he terms the "punch," and on his way out will stop at the desk and ask casually for more information about the writers on youth and age.

Eventually the teacher of English composition may become bold enough to set as a theme topic "The Advantages of Latin to the Writer of Freshman Themes." And from this set of themes he will learn strange things. For many who before had cried, "Away with it! Give us French, give us Spanish, yes, give us

German," now declare that they are glad that they have studied Latin, because through it they have acquired a knowledge of English grammar; some even succeeding in that very paragraph in convincing him that they know nothing of any grammar, ancient or modern. Others confess that although they have no love for the Latin language they are glad to be acquainted with it, for through it they became interested in the phenomena of words, and without it they would not be able to trace certain etymologies with which they proceed at once to abuse all sense of etymological justice. Here are a few specimens from a rather large display:

Many times during my third year of Latin I wondered if this dead language which I was attempting to master would ever do me any good. I knew that it would take years to be able to read Latin without the use of a Latin-English dictionary and I was sure that I could never learn to speak it. I finally finished my third year of it, consoling myself with the thought that it would probably be of some use to me or it wouldn't be taught in high school. In my fourth year when I began reading Virgil I sort of enjoyed the work and gave little thought to whether it would ever be of any use to me or not. Since I have been out of high school I have found it to be of use to me many times, especially in defining words. It has not only helped me in enlarging my vocabulary but has made French a lot easier for me to grasp. Then again I've learned more English grammar from studying Latin than from studying English grammar itself. Besides these benefits which I have received, Latin has also made me familiar with the meaning of a few Latin expressions that are frequently quoted; and I expect that it will be of still more use to me when I enter the medical college and come across Latin medical terms.

The next is avowedly pessimistic:

I have taken two years of this language and I have never been able to discern any real good that its knowledge has done me. In the first place it was so difficult that I was never able to understand more than half of it, which did not aid in increasing my interest in it. But I have never been able to appreciate its real value anyway. There is for me but one real argument in its behalf, and that is this: it is so much harder than a modern language that it makes the latter comparatively easy. Whether this is a true virtue or not is not for me to say, but it is the one argument in favor of Latin study that I have been able to obtain from my thoughts on the subject.

The next is on the whole rather appreciative:

Latin in the first place increased my vocabulary a great deal and gave me an insight into big words which I was lacking before. It taught me the derivation of words. It gave me that peculiar feeling that one has when he knows

that he has accomplished a little more than the next fellow. By my readings of Caesar and Virgil I can feel that I have read those ancient stories in the original language and I have learned to appreciate them more. My study of Latin has helped me and is helping me in my study of French. It also is a great help to anyone taking Spanish. It has taught me the older style of writings and appreciation of our modern literature. It has also helped me in my English grammar.

Still another writes:

I do not regret having studied Latin for four years because it has helped me in the following ways: in understanding my own language better, the grammar, syntax, etc. Also in the derivation of words Latin helps me to obtain the correct meanings, especially those words that come directly from the Latin. Latin grammar has also aided me in studying French grammar, aiding me in forming the various tenses and also personal endings which are quite similar in French and Latin. Then again whenever I think or read about that part of Stevenson's *Master of Ballantrae* in which is the scene of the old master sitting by the fire with a copy of Virgil or Livy, this scene, seems to bring to mind that the old man gets an immense amount of amusement out of this pastime.

Another, this time a Russian, writes:

I have studied Latin for two years. Although I found it to be a difficult language to speak, I was very much interested in it and devoted very much of my high-school life to it. Latin helps me now to analyze a great number of the English vocabularies. I remember the morning when I read the following headline in an English newspaper: "The Czar of Russia Abdicated." I did not know the meaning of the word "abdicated." I took it apart into *ab* and *dico* and here I found the meaning. Not long ago I received a letter from a friend of mine. He wrote me that a certain fellow, a graduate of our class, was abducted by the Sophomores in college. Here again the word "abducted" is derived from the Latin *ab* and *duco*. I solved the meaning without referring to the dictionary. This is due to the fact that I studied Latin. I am sorry now that I did not continue it at least for another two years.

Others were not sufficiently interested to write a paragraph, but made out a little list of blessings instead. For example:

Why I study Latin: (1) For its cultural value. (2) For its use to me in the derivation of words. (3) For its historical value; its insight into the beliefs and customs of the Romans. (4) For general knowledge I gain in mythology.

And another:

Value of Latin: (1) Inducement to read other books. (2) Made the learning of Spanish more simple. (3) Derivation of words. (4) Enhanced

my vocabulary. (5) Aided in the study of ancient history and geography. (6) A satisfaction to know a little about the dead language.

From this one can readily see that what a rhetoric instructor learns of the linguistic equipment of his students seldom accords with the claims they set forth in their themes. In fact he is sorely tempted after months of what may prove useless care and anxiety to follow the ancient example and tell them to give no thought about what they would say, for in the day and hour of their need the spirit will inspire them and they will speak. They are all too prone to act on this principle, however, even without the advice; and many an example of what the spirit will do for them may be seen in the maudlin attempts at verse that a fond youth will make when his fancy lightly turns as directed by the great poet of the Victorians. Booth Tarkington, in *Seventeen*, has immortalized this sort of literary effort. The callow youth, under the spell of love "walked up and down the room, frowning; but suddenly his brow cleared and his eye lit with purpose. Seating himself at a small writing table by the window, he proceeded to express his personality—though with considerable labor—in something he did not doubt to be a poem.

"Three-quarters of an hour having sufficed for its composition, including 'rewriting and polish,' he solemnly signed it, and then read it several times in a state of hushed astonishment. He had never dreamed that he could do anything like this:

"MILADY

"I do not know her name
Though it would be the same
Where roses bloom at twilight
And the lark takes his flight
It would be the same anywhere
Where music sounds in air
I was never introduced to the lady
So I could not call her Lass or Sady
So I may call her Milady
By the sands of the sea
She always will be
Just Milady to me."

The untaught, inflamed by the soul-devouring blossom, always write in this manner; and there is for them at least this saving grace; they know not what they say. But unfortunately the object of their adoration often does. Then we have tragedy.

The teacher of composition, after many serious attempts to discern for the sake of his students the relative merits of languages ancient and modern as aids to composition, is tempted to say that it is vanity to bother with any language other than English, unless the student gives it much time and care. In fact he is almost persuaded to take refuge behind Spencer's theory of economy applied to words as an easy, or at least comfortable, solution for the problem. And the Freshman—"He will answer to the purpose, easy things to understand." But he will never learn to write. It is very true that a non-Latin vocabulary, call it Saxon, if you will, is familiar from childhood, and is composed of short words, often concrete, sometimes onomatopoetic and economical of the recipient's attention. But the great objection is that these words refuse so often to record what the writer is minded to say. One page of Spencer's essay is enough to show what would have become of his argument if he had trusted it to a Saxon vocabulary. True, a Freshman with a Saxon vocabulary, like anyone else, can write plain blunt English, easy to apprehend; for we all agree on the meaning of such words. If, as sometime happens, a metaphor is involved in some one of them, it is so overwashed with the débris of time that its double force is not recognized. Not so with the Latin derivative: sometimes every other word involves a metaphorical connotation, the effect of which, if correctly used, is like the melody that's sweetly played in tune. We do not feel called upon to peer at the technique of fingers and bow. But let the performer wander from the key; we sit up and shudder and think unutterable things. The Freshman often *does* wander from the key, and we sometimes keep him company. Ghosts of dead meanings flutter about such words and lift themselves protestingly in the dim light of our understanding and squeak and gibber at our disregard for their natural and literal rights. He is a wise Freshman who becomes aware of the vitality of such words; for they are neither cadavers nor

moribund. Unfortunately, wise Freshmen are few; for in their verbal equipment both the Philistine and the Children of Light are weak. The former, if he would cling to his inheritance might at least be clear of statement; but he will not cling, so he meets confusion and delusion and illusion and the rest of the pack. For in his reading he picks up many Latin derivatives the true meaning of which he will never know. These he uses with the audacity of present-day crassitude. And the result is too pathetic for comment.

The condition of the Children of Light is often far better, but it may be even worse. The following theme should bring upon its author a sentence at least as severe as that of Orgetorix:

LATIN, JUST LATIN

Insomuch as I have studied Latin four years, it remains to me just Latin. Perhaps, however, that is a trifle misconstrued in strictest truthfulness, but in few instances has my slight knowledge of that language been of material advantage to me. Nevertheless to have even a passing acquaintance with a language gives one that small (or great, in accordance with one's ideas of ego) satisfaction of possessing some cultural education. So while not regretting the time spent in studying Latin, I do not wish to devote myself further to its study, because I feel that the time could be better spent in other studies.

In the language of jargon, the answer is in the affirmative. The time could be spent to advantage at almost anything other than study. It is easy to gather from the author's smug, self-satisfied air and his atrocious English, just how much time he spent in the study of Latin. And today he is working just as hard at English composition.

There is but one type worse than this: the one that has developed a mania for word forms and combinations that tend to produce the effect of Aristophanes' famous word for "hash." He strings long words into longer sentences, paying heed to naught but sound and fury. When told he is abusing the language, he will cite ancient history to the effect that while in high school he was honored with the editorship of his school magazine, was the star of the debating team, class orator, and otherwise petted and pampered. Then, when he sees a cloud rising from the Peloponnesus, he will drop into a conciliatory mood and promise to be

good and try to write with monosyllabic simplicity just to please his rhetoric instructor, and hope meanwhile for better things in the day when he shall have attained the freedom of the school of journalism. Feeling himself destined for great things and fully equipped for their pursuit, he chafes at finding himself sacrificed for the whim of one who has no literary appreciation. His plight is really pathetic; and nothing short of a strong course in philology can save him. But this he will never get, for his meaningless vocabulary makes him sure that he has no need of any such course. Yet he uses by the dozen words that he cannot define. To him *arrogate* means irritate; *lugubrious* means oily; *adversary*, on the contrary; *nuptial*, binding; *obstreperous*, unnecessary; *parricide*, a certain kind of happening; *pervade*, enter without permission; *progeny*, helper; *participle*, a grammatical expression; *obsolete*, able to be absolved; *monument*, a small unit of time; *omen*, a decree by some person; *calorie*, medicine, etc.; the list is too long. But then, a professor and a staunch Latin champion, at that, lecturing on a scientific subject has been heard to say: "When this condition arises the whole ground must be thoroughly eradicated." So why rail too loud at the poor student?

Investigation of the average student's grammatical knowledge discovers ignorance. Most of them write by faith alone, and, in the light of their answers to a set of questions on grammar, the surprising thing is, how far this faith can lead them. Sometimes, of course, perplexities arise. The object of a verb is put in the accusative case, any Freshman will admit; but when this object serves as antecedent for the subject of a relative clause, many Freshmen feel that a sense of concord should lead to a change of case on the part of the antecedent. So they write: "Reward him, but be sure to reward *he* who deserves the prize." Some even think that a preposition, although it is potent enough to dominate the case of a solitary pronoun, loses its potency under the spell of the conjunction "and." They would write: "Bring an apple for her, but bring some also for *he* and I." And both Philistine and Child of Light are capable of writing: "I cannot help but ask for more money; for due to the high cost of living, there is no doubt but that it is hard to get along on the old allowance." The one

may write thus from inexperience, while the other may be subconsciously influenced by the *non est dubium quin* construction; so where the ignorance of the one may lead him into error, the knowledge of the other serves as no bulwark of defense.

About structure the less said the better. One may not meet in ten years a student who was ever impressed with the pomp of the Caesarcic period or the scintillation of the Ciceronian. Virgil is poetry, a thing taboo to any self-respecting young fellow who has attained to the dignity of the Freshman class and come to look upon himself as a man. Now lies he here, prone in the cave of English composition, *Monstrum, horrendum, informe, ingens, cui lumen ademptum*. If that *lumen* be Greek, the reason for the darkness is plain; but if Latin, then the teachers of Latin by considering to some degree the needs of writers of English composition might ameliorate the conditions that beset the teachers of that subject at the present time.

How can the Latin teacher help the student of English composition? The teacher who demands literal translation may get something like this: "Diviciacus, this oration having been delivered, dug out." And the student will claim immunity for any abuse of his mother-tongue; for naturally he has little care for exactness or elegance. But if, on the other hand, the teacher emphasizes the importance of elegant English translation, the sedulous student will go out at once and buy a copy, and straightway set to making an interlinear of his text, taking no care to make the English words assume any local relation to their Latin equivalents. The result is that in Virgil, under the line *Cum subitum dictuque oritur mirabile monstrum* one may find the solitary English word "omen" set clearly and distinctly beneath *oritur*, or in *Fert picturatas auri subtemine vestes, picturatas* may rest in luxurious ease, seated upon English "garments." It is hard to decide which method shows the better part of valor.

Professor Bennett's recommendation of the Latin hour as an hour for faultless English is not always practical; it is demanding what neither teacher nor pupil is always ready to supply. Faultless English is rather hard to attain, and in itself does not greatly further the knowledge of Latin, which is the aim of the course.

But at least once a week the student should be required to attempt to reproduce in class under supervision a written translation closely following the rhetorical excellence of the text as well as its verbal significance. If he can do this in Caesar and Cicero, he may come in time to appreciate *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In Virgil he should make a careful examination of the metaphors and similes, and gather parallel examples from Milton, Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, and others who have imitated the classical manner. In addition he should construct in Virgilian meter amplified similes on original themes. Then when he comes to English composition he will know better than to construct a simile for mere literary embellishment.

So with the other figures, and they are many; the student should make his list and memorize it and keep the examples and the names fixed in his mind. In Virgil he finds:

- Ellipsis: i. 76, Aeolus haec contra.
- Hendiadys: i. 61, molem et montis altos.
- Zeugma: ii. 258, Danaos et laxat claustra Sinon.
- Pleonasm: i. 614, sic ore locuta est.
- Enallage: i. 21, populum late regem.
- Hypallage: iii. 61, dare classibus austros.
- Prolepsis: i. 61, submersas obrue puppis.
- Hysteron proteron: ii. 353, moriamur et in media arma ruamus.
- Tmesis: i. 610, quae me cumque terrae vocant.
- Hyperbole: v. 319, ventis ocior.
- Synecdoche: ii. 333, mucrone corusco.
- Metonymy: v. 662, furit Volcanus; v. 198, tremit puppis.
- Transferred epithet: i. 224, mare velivolum.
- Simile: i. 148.
- Aposiopesis: i. 135, quas ego . . . sed motos praestat componere fluctus.
- Apostrophe: viii. 643, et tu dictis Albane, maneres.
- Onomatopoeia: i. 55, magno cum murmure montis.

This of course is not in accord with the notions of the up-to-date rhetorician of today, nor is it intended to be. He is a plain blunt man with a "punch" that would reduce all figures to metaphors as well as all punctuation to periods with an occasional comma here and there to serve the ultra-fastidious.

He cries out against all this as though it were wanton cruelty, and asks why puzzle the child's brain with such rubbish? Why

not teach him something useful? For him there is no answer; he has in his mind no vision of the spirit of words, he thinks of agony as pain, parallel as a line, apology as an expression of servile abnegation, and occasion as a synonym for opportunity. What answer can we make? He may spend his days and nights with the dictionary and never learn how little it has to say nor how often it is wrong.

Moreover all students of Latin should be made to pronounce Latin with certainty and read it with fluency. This and the correct pronunciation of every proper name should become a religious rite observed at every recitation. And phrases and lines should be learned and repeated over and over with particular reference to their rhythms, both prose and verse, for unless the words and phrases are occupants of the mind and feel themselves perfectly at home there, they will be of no great help to the student who would have a vocabulary sufficient for his need. And when the student comes to Virgil he should memorize lines by the half-dozens and dozens. Then only will he have his ammunition ready within the barriers of his teeth, then only will Virgil become a literary asset of any great value.

If thus taught he would have the following advantages over the average student who had no ancient languages:

1. A working knowledge of real grammar, including the use and abuse of the conjunction, the most abused thing in the English language.
2. Familiarity with a considerable vocabulary, much of which has come directly across into English, and confidence in the presence of polysyllabic English words.
3. The ability to use an English dictionary with a reasonable hope of profit.
4. An introduction to rhetoric that insures comprehension of sentence and paragraph structure, figures of speech, and other literary devices that make for elegance of phrase and accuracy of statement, a feeling for word order and for rhythm, and a glimpse at the possibilities of vowel and consonant values which one is not apt to attain through the study of any modern language.
5. A comfortable confidence in the presence of foreign phrases and classical proper names.

6. An appreciation of a few important contributions to a very solid and concentrated literature.

Students thus taught, and they are met with even today, know that the tirade against Latin and Greek, like other windy ways of men,

Is but dust that rises up
And is lightly laid again.

He knows that with Latin or Greek he is intellectually doubled, even in the understanding of his own language and literature. And he is not afraid, in the presence of unsympathetic teachers, to say that he is not only glad to have studied preparatory Latin and Greek, but is determined in college to pursue those studies further. For he knows in his heart that neither the disease of Latin nor the death of Greek is to be laid at the door of the unwilling student, whose unwillingness is more the result of insidious influence from without than from deep-seated antipathy from within. Rather is it to be laid at the doors of his leaders who, uneducated themselves, cheat him of his high-school dues and send him up to college, uninformed of even thier potential value, to bear witness to the blight that has fallen on twentieth-century education.